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A DRAGON LAUGHED

And Other Poems

By the Same Author

POET'S PUB

WHITE MAA'S SAGA

A DRAGON LAUGHED
AND OTHER POEMS

BY

ERIC LINKLATER

JONATHAN CAPE
THIRTY BEDFORD SQUARE, LONDON

FIRST PUBLISHED 1930

JONATHAN CAPE LTD., 30 BEDFORD SQUARE, LONDON
AND 81 WELLINGTON STREET WEST, TORONTO
JONATHAN CAPE & HARRISON SMITH INC.
139 EAST 46TH STREET, NEW YORK

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY J. AND J. GRAY, EDINBURGH
PAPER MADE BY JOHN DICKINSON & CO. LTD.
BOUND BY A. W. BAIN & CO. LTD.

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TO ELIZABETH MY MOTHER

You told us tales of sailing-ships
When we were young,
And on your lips,
(As if a little chime of bells
Distantly swung),
Were names of painted cities by the sea,
Musical, mystery names;
Or else
Old stories of old sailors, 'prentices' games
That ended joyously
With cooking stolen sweetmeats on a fire;
Stories of sudden flames
That lit the mast-head, and forlorn
Cold whispered stories of the gales
That snarl with icy voices round Cape Horn;
Stories of whiter sails
Than moonlight; stories of Java Head
Where jungle tumbles down to meet the sea –
Always the sea; your stories fled
Like English rivers to the sea,
Wind, wave and cloud, the ivory-lonely gull,
And round about the sea
The cities with their beautiful,
Musical, mystery names.

Now all those ships are dead; their sails were furled;
Beneath the sky-line sank those tall white towers;
The ships you knew, like splendid flowers
About the wildest garden in the world –

Windflowers that shone
In valleys of the sea – all these are gone.

And how shall I give stories back to you
Who lived among such beauty? There's nothing new
So beautiful as those grey ghosts
Of sailing-ships that whisper to the wind,
And glide so stilly by remembered coasts.

What can I tell ? – A boy who went to war?
That was your story twice as much as mine.
What have I seen? – you've seen the best before.
A little wonder at the gale
That fills a heart as if a sail,
A song that I have tried to sing,
Some stories won by travelling
From book to book (their pages turning
Like narrow doors in Castle Learning),
A dream that burrowed as a mole,
Blindly, to find a dead queen's soul,
A jest, for no more reason made
Than other pleasant games are played,
A foreign town, a foreign hill. . . .
Yours are the better stories still.

PART I

THE FAITHLESS SHEPHERD

With nice observance of the rules
And precepts of the pastoral schools,
A shepherdess, as fair as pure,
Beneath a hedgerow sat demure.
With conscious grace before her feet
Her swain lay faithfully supine,
Essaying neatly to combine
Positions patently discreet
With rustic notions of design.

Hedge-high the wild small roses grew
To kiss the breeze, and yet there blew
In Phœbe's cheek a wilder rose
That Corin watered with his woes.

Of sighs and chosen words he twined
A cunning thread to trap and bind
The bird that sang in Phœbe's heart;
With careful hand he spread the lime,
The tuneful tears, the weary rhyme
Of tattered, patched Italian art,
And tirelessly reset the snare
Of piping music's gusty ware.

Yet loving he observed the rules
Laid down for use in pastoral schools,
And all advantages eschewed
Of Phœbe's solitude.

And still in spite of poetry
And this too subtle courtesy,

She tarried coldly continent;
No signal of surrender flamed,
Though orthodoxy clearly claimed
A maidenly consent.

There stood in shade of friendly grass
A jug with sweet cool wine a-brim,
And, weary of his Lover's Mass,
Tall Corin took the sacrament
A readier chalice offered him.
The honest wine first cooled his head,
And led back laughter that had fled
The solemn ritual of love.

And in a little while
The countryside, that once had been
A placidly enamelled screen,
He saw as mile on waving mile
Of grass that grew more richly green,
Of flowers and jolly rotund hills,
Of deeply chuckling meadow-rills,
And marching roads; while far above
The portly clouds that statelily
Had stalked across the level sky,
Were tripped and tumbled by the wind
In coltish merriment.

Till, peering through the wine, half-blind
And swimming up in slow ascent,
The bottom of the honest jug
Appears like Truth, all soft and snug
And pinkly naked in her well.

Then Corin laughs. His glances dwell
Once more on Phœbe and he sees
The wild rose flaming in her cheek.
And now no more on pilgrim knees
He pleads a docile love and meek,
But boldly clips her in his arms
And quiets her modest faint alarms
With kiss on eager kiss that sips
The rose-red nectar of her lips.
And now his love grows kind to feel
The soft white arms that slowly steal
About his neck. Now Phœbe's kisses,
Each one Love's virgin young Ulysses,
In turn seek rest on Corin's lips. . . .

A vagrant cloud for mockery
Slid solemnly athwart the sun,
And in the leaves, half-breathlessly,
A tiny breeze hid shivering.
Hedge-high the small wild roses flare,
Whose petals, gravely curtseying,
Blow softly down on Phœbe's hair. . . .

And still the bottom of the jug,
With innocent unwinking eye,
Stared nakedly into the sky.

SILENUS

Silenus sat a little way
Apart from the unquiet play
Of goat-foot satyrs, and the throng
Of nymphs flushed red with wine. Their song
Seemed shrill against the silence of the trees. . . .
He was quite sober, ill at ease,
Now weakly nursing discontent,
Now angry at his satyrs' merriment.

Three days before a herd had brought
Some skins of upland wine, and sought
To match them in a drinking-bout –
Ere half the wine was in, his luck was out;
But still the satyrs sat and drank
Till they too drenched their sleepy clay,
And followed to oblivion
The fleering moon that rocked and sank,
And old Silenus was alone.
He, striving solemnly to sing
Forgotten catches, reeled away
Among the beeches, bravely hiccuping.

He had awakened crapulous
Beneath the staring noon, and flies
Were clustered in an angry fuss
Where wine had spilt about his beard
And hairy arms. He tried to rise,
And fell again; and someone jeered
At him. He saw a maid,
Her beauty in the hot green shade
Like silver or white ivory,

And smiling foolishly
He staggered to unsteady feet
And tried to catch her. Mocking him
She slipt among the trees with fleet
Elusive steps, and kept her slim
Young body from his eager hand,
Till fat Silenus, panting his defeat,
Had halted. He could not understand
Why she should run – they all were kind
To him, the forest nymphs, and she,
A mortal girl, could scarce be blind
To his divinity.

Again he sought her, slim and white,
Like ivory against the bright
Green silk of leaves, and tried to woo
Her with the wisdom he had found
In midnight forests, where the dew
Hung heavy, and the moon lay drowned
In quiet pools; but he was stale
With wine, and told a maudlin tale.
Her laughter made him querulous
And boast about his triumphs, how
He slew the giant Enceladus,
And rode the golden East, his brow
With ivy bound, and underfoot
A path of endless flowers, flung low
Before the singing magic of his flute.
The girl still mocked him, heartlessly.
She only saw an old fat man
Whose most ungodlike belly shook
With windy sighs. Then, weary, took

Her idle leave of him, and ran
Away on some new springtime quest,
Leaving the greenwood strangely unpossessed. . . .

So old Silenus sat apart
From all his satyrs, stubbornly
Forsaking wine to fill his heart
With sick remembrance.
His throat grew dry.
A wine-skin, gurgling, fell to earth.
He moved uneasily. The mirth
Of nymphs and satyrs seemed to wake
The echoes sleeping in the wine
To laugh at fools who peak and pine,
And sniff their tears, when they can slake
An honest thirst in honest drink. . . .

The girl was mortal, anyhow,
And beauty dies; her breasts would sink
To heavy shapelessness, her brow
Grow wrinkled and her laughter shrill.
But wine! ah, wine is wine until
It runs along the veins and then
It's fire and laughter – gods grow men
And men flush red to feel divine,
And – 'Wine, you topers, give me wine!'
He cries, and all the roaring crew
Bring wine and laughter, hailing him
With shouts and tumbled wreaths of flowers,
And drink and drown the day's last hours
Till darkness comes, and pale stars swim
On their deep seas of midnight blue.

But when the moon rode clear and high
She saw, not very far from there,
A girl who slept. She was as fair
As silver or white ivory
And in her sleep she mocked mortality.

COPHETUA

The King Cophetúa grew fat.
There was more comfort in the way he sat
In his great padded chair than kingliness.
For it was afternoon, and kings must dine
On peacocks stufft with spice, or bless
Their bellies with a lamprey stewed in wine,
A sucking-pig, gobbets of turtle green
As figs, and figs themselves—queens love to eat
A pie-crust and stiff cream, the sunny meat
Of peach and purple plum and nectarine –
But kings prefer a haunch of venison.
And afterwards, when dinner's done,
There's no more comfortable thing
Than lazily unbuttoning
To woo, with mouth and waist agape,
Sleep's blowsy daylight shape.

COPHETUA'S QUEEN

Cophetua's Queen stood by the goldfish pool,
Watching the glittering carp that fled, like cool
Irrational flames, into the lotos-dusk,
Or came so greedily for scraps of rusk.
Once, like the pool, her mind had been alive
With darting shapes, desires that leapt to dive
Again to darkness, hungers irresolute
And vivid, little greeds that lit the mute
Still pool of her mind. And now the hungers that
Had served her for a brain were grown too fat
To move. This garden of magnificence
Had crammed her full, clogged every sense
With unimagined sweets, clapt honey on
The lips of young imagination
And stifled it, or made its belly sore
With sugar plums until it asked no more.
She was still beautiful (as beautiful
As flawless marble can be, and as dull),
But now so placid, and so much a queen,
Only a yawn could ruffle her serene. . . .
Calmly she fed the goldfish as they came
Like golden hunger and went out like flame.

A DRAGON LAUGHED

With grateful feeling for romance
And medieval circumstance,
A dragon came beneath the brown
High walls of old Duke Baldwin's town,
Blew puffs of flame that palely shone,
And with his tail beat clamour on
His scaly flank.

The bursting petals of the flame,
Flushing and fading, left a drift
Of umber smoke; and echoes came
A-rumble round the hollow lift
Of hard blue sky,
Snarling again among the roofs,
And died reluctantly.

'Alack,' the Duke's good people said,
'Another virgin doomed to wed
This glutton of fair maidenhead!'

A bell tolled slowly from the Keep,
And townsfolk clattered up the steep
Rough cobbled paths, and through dim alleys
With clattering rush and startled sallies
Towards the Inner Gate –
Old soldiers with brown battered faces,
Fat merchants, monks with shaven pates,
And smiths with leather aprons,
And overflowing matrons
With breathless haste and gasping paces;

And wide-eyed maidens pant and run
Too conscious of the flower that none
Has plucked – or tried to pluck –
And barking dogs, and children struck
To their bewildered hearts with noise.

Then, silencing the buzzing folly,
A trumpet spoke with golden voice
And old Duke Baldwin came.
'This prankish dragon,' he said slowly,
'Once more has come to claim
His seven-yearly sacrifice,
And where's the virgin fair enough,
The fairest maiden maid enough,
To buy our ransom at his price?'

'Ettarre,' they said; and 'Melicent';
And 'Maulfry of the Raven Hair,'
Some said; and some were ill-content
That these were judged to be most fair
And virginal, but forfeited
Their rightful claim for charity.

'Let Maulfry and Ettarre,' he said,
'And Melicent come forth while we
Debate of beauty.'

Then 'Melicent!' they cried, and 'Where
Is Maulfry of the Raven Hair?'
'Ettarre!' they shouted. 'There you go,
Ettare!' and swaying to and fro
The jostling crowd pushed round about

Seeking within its depths the three
In danger from virginity.

Now some short while before, without
More help than their bright mirrors lent,
They had anticipated this –
Maulfry, Ettarre, and Melicent –
And smiled most sadly, being cursed
With such a fatal loveliness.

''Twould break the mother's heart who nursed
Me to such beauty,' Maulfry cried,
'Were I to die a dragon's bride!'
And 'Shame,' thought Melicent, 'that I
Should so have kept my purity
For a green dragon's squandering.'

Ettarre sighed softly, sighed 'Heigh-ho!
No lovely young thing dies in Spring
When birds sing and white roses blow.'

So Maulfry cropt her raven hair
To guard her lovely innocence,
And trusting to a bold boy's stare
Donned page's hose for more defence.
And Melicent sought forest shades
Where valiant lions roamed the glades,
Knowing the beasts are pure in heart
And reverent of virginity.
For many days apart
From rude humanity did she
Live in a long-dead hermit's cell,

And nightly stretched before her door
A gentle panther watched her well.

Only Ettare lived as before,
And her grey eyes
Watched peacefully, without surmise,
Old Farmer Time cut golden corn
Each evening in his sunset field.

But now, with danger near at hand,
And Melicent nor Maulfry there,
Nor rival maid to comfort her,
She feared at last to be forlorn
Alone with that fierce dragon, and
Her voice, as she appealed
For mercy, stuck choking in her throat
And would not set two words in place. . . .
Was that red cloud that seemed to float
Far off, the old Duke's autumn face?
And that his voice, that booming tune
That roared in her dead mind?

And then a sob struck through her swoon.
She went, with all that crowd behind,
Old roads that now looked white and new
Down to the Gate, across the moat,
And out to rolling fields of grass.
And now she was alone where blue
Flower-trumpets challenge all who pass,
Marauding bees and butterflies
And lads with lovers' watchful eyes.

And courage came back on the wind,
She laughed, and left her fear behind –
'No lovely young thing dies in Spring,
When roses blow and small birds sing.'
And by and by she came to see
Coiled underneath an almond-tree
The great green Dragon watching her
With topaz eyes that never stir.
'God speed,' he said, and coughed a flame,
'And, of your courtesy, your name?'

'Ettarre,' she said, 'but – ' 'No buts here,'
Replied the Dragon with a leer.
'A virgin's buts are puff-balls blown
Against a dragon's heart of stone.'
'Ah, but – ' she said, and in his ear
(Though no chance listener was near)
She whispered, shy but confident.

The goggled amber of his eyes
Reflected his irate surprise,
But when she told how Melicent
And Maulfry found their comfort marred
By scarlet hose and watchful pard –
All to avoid a Dragon who
Was famous for his chivalry –
Why, then he laughed most heartily,
And shook to think how one must show
Her legs to all the town, and t'other
Have not a soul to show them to
Except a pious lion or so –

And to recall the modest ruse
By which Ettarre escaped such pother
(The ruse, too simple-safe to fail,
She planned with young Sir Paravail),
The laughter quickened down his sides
To ebb and flow like tiny tides
Among the wrinkled changing hues
Of his broad back; laughing outright
The green and turquoise of his hide
Became a scaly ridge of light,
Of glimmering amethyst and jade,
And flashing emeralds displayed
A thousand facets to the sun.
And ere his joy had well begun
He twisted hard his knotty tail,
For ease and stiff security,
About the almond-tree.
So as he shook with gorgeous mirth
Pink petals fluttered gaily down,
A fragile storm that beat upon
The lustre of his giant girth
And all the quivering earth.

. . . . .

Hey-day, Sir Paravail!
Coming from the foreign war,
He was told a merry tale
Of the Dragon and Ettarre,
How the one had burst his spleen,
(Laughter tore him up and down)

And Ettarre had richly been
Hailed and honoured as the saviour
Of the Duke and all his town.

Hey-day, the girl Ettarre!
Who shall judge a maid's behaviour?
Scarcely had they two been wed
Than Ettarre was brought to bed
Of Paravail's young son.

Now you know her modest ruse,
Safest that a maid can choose
When she sees what perils lie
In beauty and virginity.

The Yellowhammer shook the spray
It clung to, and the little Crab-tree cried,
'Well, what's the news to-day?'

'What's new?'
The Blue-bells clamoured, and the Grasses sighed,
'The Wind won't say a word that's true,
Oh, tell us, do!'

'I know,' shouted the Stream, 'I've got a fish
Bright as a silver dish –
That's new!'

'Nobody spoke to you,'
Replied the Primrose and the Cuckoo-flower,
'You change from hour to hour,
Doesn't he babble and stammer?'

'Listen, ah, listen!' sang Yellowhammer,
'Or guess if you can what I heard
From a great green bird
In the wood.'

'Oh, what new thing has He made? But nothing
as good
As the lilac flower and the lilac-tree,
And the little blue-tits that laughingly
He took from the blue of His eye.'

'Or as good as the moonlight-moths that nightly
Flutter our stems as they softly fly,'
Said the Grasses, rustling slightly.

'Nothing as good as my little Trout
That flashes and flickers and flies in and out,
My silvery Trout that darts about,'
Said the Stream with a silvery clamour.

(Said a wandering Wind: '*He's building a wall*
Two feet thick and ten feet tall.')

'Listen, ah, listen!' sang Yellowhammer.
'Is this a worse or a better thing?
Something as tall as the lilac-tree
And sweet as a bird to sing –
Something to touch you delicately
As the tip of a white moth's wing –
Something as strong as the climbing bear,
Kind as Himself and fleet as a hare,
Eager to know you and swifter to stoop
If the Grass should cry or the Primrose droop.'

'What?' said the Stream.
Whispered the Grass
'What?' And a deeper gleam
Of gold did pass
Over the Primrose. 'Tell!'
Said the jealous Blue-bell
In the quivering shade
Of the Crab-tree. 'What,'
Said they all in a chorus,

'What has He bade
To lord it o'er us –
What has He made?'

'Adam,' the bird replied.
'A man called Adam and a woman, Eve,
To live with him and walk beside
While he shall teach and she believe.
And each of them will be the friend
Of all created things, and tend
The shaken tree, the limping doe,
And watch the nestlings where they go.'

Said a whistling Wind, '*A grey stone wall,*
Two feet thick and ten feet tall,
A garden wall,' said the wandering Wind. . . .
But nobody heard, and none would mind,
For the thought of Adam obscured the sky
And the thought of Eve was a melody
That all had known and none had played –
'Eva!' they sang, as the Bunting said:
'Then the bird in the forest told me this,
That the man and the woman, for greater bliss,
Would live in a garden of windy trees,
(A curtain above their hours of ease)
Coloured with flowers and girt with a stream,
A garden planted apart for them.'
'A garden?' said the Crab-tree. 'Stuff!'
He looked about him. 'Aren't *we* good enough?'

The Primrose was the first to think of it –
That this green yard indeed, their meadow-bit

Between the Crab-tree and the Brook, might be
The garden planned for young humanity –
And could not speak because the great thought shook
Her with such frightened joy; and then the Brook,
Guessing alike, babbled her secret out,
Splashing in shallows with a sudden rout
And scramble of protesting pebbles while
Small waves careered about them, shouting, 'Smile,
You pebble-stones! oh, bounce and break your bones!
They're coming here, I tell you – days of joy!
Think of Eve bathing here – oh, God's the boy!
And Adam fishing – hallelujah, stones!'

The others took no notice of the Stream,
But were so still, beneath their hovering dream,
They looked more like a picture of such things
Than Blue-bells, Cuckoo-flowers, and Bunting's wings
Painting the grass with colour, gilding the tree.
Happiness, like the thin transparency
That makes a bubble out of nothing, threw
A radiance on them, and the rainbow hue
Was scarcely ruffled by the gossip Wind
(Calling the deaf and nodding to the blind)
Who whistled shrilly, '*A mason's wall*
Two feet thick and ten feet tall,
A wall for Adam, a garden wall,
Elm-tree thick and holly tall.'

Only the Crab-tree, stirring out of dream,
Questioned the Bunting, 'What does the fellow
mean?'

'Little enough,' the bird replied.
'Some river fields the other side
O' the forest – Eden or some such name
They're called – are being fenced for game.'

'For game?' said the Crab-tree lazily.

'Big game,' the Bunting said. 'You see,
As things are now He couldn't leave
Tigers at large to frighten Eve,
And so He's making them a cage
Where they can safely snarl and rage –
At least I think so.'

'God's the boy,'
Remarked the stream with simple joy,
'I knew He'd own up, soon enough,
That tigers' ways are rather rough,
And they, and things like bison too,
Are only suited for a Zoo.'

'So that's the reason for the wall,'
The Crab-tree said, and several
Thin whispers rustled through the grass,
'Dear God! now Eve can safely pass
Among the harmless flowers if all
Fierce tigers live behind a wall.'

(The wind, between the darkness and the flowers,
Sifting the sunlight from the day's last hours,
Hallooed across the vacant sky,
'*Coffin-tree thick and gallows high!*')

'Dear God!' the Blue-bells prayed, 'so choose
A place for every creature whose
Cruel feet can hurt us as they fall,
And if you love your flowers put all
Your larger beasts behind a wall!'

Said the Primrose, little and yet more sage,
'We're lucky if tigers have a cage.'

'*A wall, smooth and unscaleable,*
Pierced by a gate with iron bars
And a seraph for a sentinel
Whose sword is bright as frosty stars,'
Said the Wind.
'*And none goes out and none comes in*
Without the seraph's questioning –
A pretty cage for tigers, eh?'
Said the cold Night-wind as he went his way.

THE BUTTERFLY AND THE BEE

I

He was the world's first butterfly,
And waking in the shadow of a leaf
He spread his dewy wings in ecstasy,
And fluttered headlong to a sheaf
Of claret-coloured roses; then
To jasmine, jonquil, cyclamen,
And lovely hedgerow flowers that had no names,
To golden-rods like narrow flames,
And sleepy petals that would curl
About a dewdrop which they thought a pearl.

There were such lovely things, he could not keep
To one – till he saw Eve asleep.
And then, finding all beauty there at rest,
He settled on the lily of her breast.
No other lily was so warm to kiss,
Nor grew a tiny rosebud such as this.
True, there was little sweetness here to sip,
Although the opening petal of her lip
Promised him nectar, and her hair
Seemed full of perfume. Oh well; he was aware
That beauty knows no economic law,
And here was beauty without flaw.

The butterfly was well content
And thought he understood what God had meant:
'Art for art's sake,' he said, and paced,
A fragile sentry, from her neck to waist.

II

She was the world's first bee
And set to work immediately.

She visited the nearer flowers
And filled the unforgiving hours
With honey and a mental list
Of lazy blooms that might be missed.
She docketed the red and white,
And which were sweeter, morn and night;
She thrust her sharp discerning tongue
Into the old, and into young
Protesting buds. She thought it true
A special flavour went with blue,
And doubted jasmine-honey would,
In sultry weather, scarce keep good.

Then one day flying farther, she
Found Eve beneath an apple-tree,
And straightway wondered if she'd room
For all the sweets this mighty bloom,
This vaster blossom, ought to yield.

She dropped upon the shining field
And sought with ordered housewife-zest
The massive lilies of Eve's breast,
And into lily, into rose,
She thrust her eager housewife's nose,
And then, and then, with injured air
She buzzed and muttered, 'I declare,
There's not a drop of honey there!

I hate to say it, but it's plain
God's made a great mistake again,
Just as He did with irises –
I'll waste no further time on this.'

But ere she left the useless thing
Annoyance prompted her to sting.
And all the garden birds were still,
The leaves hung motionless, and dragon-flies
Stood poised in air to hear Eve's piteous cries.
Young Adam, bedding out a daffodil,
Grew pale, and sweaty beads broke on his round
Ingenuous face. Even the Serpent frowned
And bit his lip; for pain had come to dwell
(Between the Bee and that shrill vocable)
In Eden.

But the Bee,
In yellow wallflowers greedily
Repairing wasted time,
And humming, '*This* is what I want!'
Heard nothing so significant
As her own busy honey-robbing rhyme.

THE ADVERSARY

Sinister, mottled-green, the snake's head slid
Between her breasts. No longer suppliant
(She felt the loose coils tightening), he chid
Her, and his eyes were arrogant.

His head swung up and loomed above her, tense
With certainty of power, hiding the sun,
Waiting with a superb impatience
Her whisper of submission.

And knowledge, like a babe for six months curled
In the sleepy womb, kicked, and no longer slept;
The innocentest voice in all the world
Renounced its innocence and wept –

Downward the blunt immobile snake's head dips,
Praise, swift and sibilant, hissing on its lips.

THE SILENT GARDEN

God walked alone beneath the almond-trees.

The Garden had a Monday-morning look.
Untidy discards of festivity
Littered the paths; someone had tried to hook
Banana-skins upon the araucaria;
A cluster of wild bees
Buzzed on some rotten fruit; a butterfly
Lay drowned in half-fermented liquor
A coco-shell, split neatly, held.

God walked a little quicker,
Frowning, turning to left and right, impelled
To look for what He loathed to see.

Some carving on the bark of a tree,
A man and woman, childishly conceived;
The smouldering trail of a fire
Forgotten; a broken branch; and everywhere
Plucked flowers, great dusty sheaves
Of blossom torn by fingers that would tire,
As soon as they were picked, of their
Rough stems.

'The fault was mine,' said God.
'I should have cut him from a dryer clod.
There were too many roots, wild roots
And ranker sap, in that I used to mould
A gardener out of. Gardeners should be old.

I should have made an oldish, barren man
To keep things tidy and preserve my fruit –
Oh, damn!' said God, 'I'll have to change my
plans.'

THE MARKET

The lady Rolandine was cold.
Her lips, that she could well withhold
From seeking mouth and thrusting beard,
Were tight and thin. Her lovers feared
The zone of chilly maidenhead
Wherewith she girt herself. They said
'Her price is high for Cupid's Mart,
This Virgin of the Frozen Heart!
Too high,' they said; "tis gallantry
And virtue both she asks, and we
May buy as fair a thing
As she can sell for flattery,
A sonnet, or a ring.'

There were fair women, and their lips
Were open flowers, whose honey-sips
Were free to passing lovers. They
Drew Rolandine's tall court away –
'No man the morrow knows,
We mock a barred eternity
And pluck the open rose.'

Proud Rolandine was lonely. She
Began to fret, grew anxious, old,
And sought to sell as others sold –
The Mart was empty, buyers gone.
But charity in her grown,
What might not sell she offered free
To men who mocked her charity.

No man she found, to her chagrin,
Desired the wrinkled Rolandine. . . .
Till on a winter night there came
A dirty greybeard, with a scythe –
God's bailiff, prowling for his tithe –
Whose eager claim
Made Rolandine's old heart grow blithe.
So that without demur she led
Him to her bed,
Nor waited to unlatch her shoes,
So great her hurry was to lose
What she had kept too long – and since
She was without experience
She did not think her lover cold,
But lay within his wintry hold
Happy as if 'twere Spring. . . .

The gossips said, "Twas no great thing
For Death to win her – 'twas her plan
To yield herself to any man.'

Because they said her flesh was sin
And that the Devil lurked within
The narrow confines of her gown,
They stript and tied her to a cart,
And dragged her through the staring town
To humble sin and coldly start
The Devil from his lair.

Her pastor walked beside to pray
That she would weep ere Judgment Day,
And prayed, and still found time to stare
Upon the pitiful white charms
Of her young breast and arms.

The hangman slouched behind
To whip her shoulders with a cord
That cut her like a curving sword,
But sword-blades sing, and his cord whined.

At the Town Cross the elders stood,
Black, buttoned close in piety –
A cross of stone more cruel than wood,
For women wept below the Tree,
And here there was no one who dared
To show her pity. But they stared
On nakedness not meant for scorn,
And every eye was like a thorn,
And silence smote her with a spear.

PART II

II

THREE FAREWELLS

I

I kissed my girl good-bye to-day –
I shall not kiss again
Grey eyes beneath a sky so grey,
Such red lips in the rain.

Her arms were hard as ivory,
Her lips were trembling-soft with grief,
But she will not remember me
Much past the turn of year –
She will forget me when the leaf
Forgets the darkness of the bud
And April's here.

And how shall I remember her
With such new things to glory in? –
The hotly coloured stir
Of Eastern towns, great stars that spin
In deeper skies, and, brighter than Spain
And Spanish gold, a fierce gold sun.

But I shall see no cold grey sky,
Nor feel the soft October rain,
Nor one thing to remember by.

2

O Marjory and little Jane,
When I kissed you good-bye
There was no murmur from the gods,
No portent in the sky.

Our kisses shattered no deep peace
Nor crowned long agony,
Our lips were laughing when they met
And parted laughingly.

You will have no flushed memories
Suppose we meet again,
And I, God help me, may not know
Dark Marjory from Jane.

3

. . . But you, whose eyes were young and grave,
Whose hand in mine lay firm as a green leaf,
You said good-bye to me neither with grief
Nor laughing. You, whose small life looks as brave
As in still dark the spear-head of a flame,
You every tawny hill shall memory,
And all the tireless sapphire of the sea;
The hollow gong of the sky shall sound your name.

For had you loved me I'd have been content
To look for night's deep beauty in your hair,
And in your arms explore a continent,
Knowing a new Cathay still virgin there. . . .
Now, watching the flying sails of dawn unfurled,
I count the cost of leave to walk the world.

SEA MOON

The broad white arrow of foam advances
Over the black Arabian sea,
Splitting the moon-path till moon-glint dances
On floors of fathomless ebony.

This is the old dance, old as toil,
That the moon and the deep sea made for ships,
To tear the rooted tree from soil
And man's heart from his true-love's lips.

Helen was lovely for ten red years
And the sorrowful beauty of Deirdre died,
But the young moon horned the oldest spheres
And the full moon wantons with every tide.

Her wet feet hasten nakedly
Their silver path to the long sky-line,
And a warm wind out of India
Washes my heart with sleep and wine.

BEHIND THE SEA

The old puff-belly sun went down behind
The blue sword-edge of the sea, and the great wind
That roars far out beyond the world
Took hold of his bright cloak and whirled
It flaunting half-across the sky –
His cloak of saffron dye,
Crocus and orpiment, lemon and August-tinted maize,
Blown to a luminous amber haze:
Filled with the inter-planet gale
It shook, for minutes, the tenantless pale
Sky, and waving gorgeously took cover
Behind the high wall of the sea. And that was over,
The curfew pageant of the Indian sun. . . .
Now peace for a cycle, that flamboyance done.

Peace for a cycle. For with the sun you too
Went down behind the sea, and the dead hue
Of starless, moonless night covered me;
And that night I slept, deep, dreamlessly,
Wrung clean of wonder, weary of thought and memory,
And woke, still wonderless, to gaze
Upon a week of bright, succeeding shallow days.
Peace was a shining emptiness.
Clouds moved across the sky, and my heart moved less
Than for the tiniest movement of your dress;
Prophets and princes of the earth fell sick and died,
Or did not die – who knows? But had you sighed

Or shivered, laughèd or frowned in that time past,
That was a vital thing, and I had cast
About for reason, comfort, remedy,
Or answering jest.
But this was peace,
This deadness, this all interest's surcease.

Then, creeping in upon the vacant thing
A scarlet streak of life came worrying,
Twisting and fretting in the void,
Twining unmeaning patterns, and destroyed
My empty calm. 'Make, make!' it clamoured,
'Make!' all through my blood. It hammered
On my dumb mind, 'Make, make!' It stammered,
This puny red life, to my sullen brain,
'Make, make! Though all creation's vain,
Creation is the end of all. Oh, make, make, make!'
And I
Took sticks of such and such, gaunt spars of my
Most primal thought, naked imagining,
And stuck them in the mud for scaffolding;
Tied planks of rash invention all across
And built, slow brick by brick, mortared with dross
Of other men's old theory, and reared
Ungainly palaces and towers that seared
The sensitive soft sky. And then
I pulled them down – easy enough, being so built –
And scarcely thinking why, started again;
Dug for foundations in the uneasy silt
Of treacherous rivers that would flood
With each new day's conjecturing, and fling
My bridges in the mud.

Still, making was the thing,
Not what was made. . . .

This was not yet
The peace that I had thought to get –
Freedom from goad and fever – when you went.

There had been moments of a full content
In which, all passion spent,
I looked at you and saw you beautiful,
Deep-bosomed, happy, and serenely dull –
Keen, keen of sense,
Full of a sensual swift intelligence,
But smilingly impregnable
To arrowy flights of theory,
Surmise and scruple and wonder. The swell
Of your full breasts was all finality,
The richness of your beauty was an end
Itself, and you had no poor need
To wonder what life might portend,
Knowing fulfilment in the seed
That warmed within your womb.

This I had sometimes seen, and then there was no room,
Even in my unquiet mind, for doubt;
I was content for a rare mate, without
A thought of that adventurer who
Should search between the stars with me,
Canvass the oldest Whys and probe the new,
Be glad, and laugh delightedly
At all the rich irrelevance of God.

Then doubt would come back. Dissatisfaction, like
a rod
Steeped the whole night in brine, beat on my soul;
Thrashed consciousness awake till torpidly,
(A snake at the warm bottom of its hole)
It peered at distant shadows that seemed to be
The shade of stronger things than warmth and the
content
Of corporal begetting; there should be more,
If Adam's heritage is not yet spent
And Man may walk with God. . . .

(God who cut Adam breathing from the sod?
Or God whom the teeming earth-born bore
Of their own lust to make – mothered by passion,
sired
By desperate hope? The meaning Man conspired
To breathe in God, not God in Man? Unending God
The Son of Man is not more strange, less reasoned
than
That restless Son of God, Immortal Man. . . .)

You have gone down behind the sea,
And I am glad, because I asked for all,
And you had only beauty and such small
Blue fragments of your peace to give to me,
Like lapis lazuli on a Moghul's wall,
Good-omen blue among the grey and green.
Perhaps I was a fool to look for more;
We do not ask a collier to be clean,
We never ask a dancer, Can you sing?

A painter, Can you count? Nor think a whore
Should make a home. But if we love
An honest woman, why, she should be everything.
I was a fool, perhaps; but folly's hard to move.

You have gone down behind the sea,
Leaving the prison open, and I am free
Who might have been a comfortable thrall.
But I have not found peace, nor shall
(Freedom's not peace, though it should be
The way to peace)
Till I have countenanced Man's immortality
By making all that lies in me to make –
Graff the ash Yggdrasil with flesh of me,
Or take
Between my breath and the black bosom of the earth
Something to mould with all the strength of my
green worth,
Penny or pound, brass or uncertain gold,
Songs of my body, sons of my fantasy,
New life to jostle ghosts of life long-told.

This is the privilege of life that's grown
Too proud for flesh and bone.
This is the superfluity of Man
That bids him walk with God or walk alone.
This is the sharper goad. . . .

And after, peace will bridge the span
That holds us from the outer stars
With smooth celestial isobars –

Or like a tunnel peace will run
Between great trees (through which the sun
Peers only with old kindly eyes),
Beneath the trees to caverns deep
And endless, earth-bound, whirling sleep,
To life unconscious in the heart
Of docile earth, to some small part
Of order under space and light,
Responsive to the master stars
In the blind discipline of night.

I

I offered to the gods prayer, rice, and curds.
The Brahman took the curds and rice
And straight to Siva went the naked words. . . .
Siva's still silent, but the Brahman rifted thrice.

II

A king who had no flatterers,
A barber without customers,
And a he-goat who had lost his flock
Stood on a hill – these three – for the winds to mock.

III

Young Prithibhai's old husband being dead
Bhika the barber came to shave her head.
(Her hair was a cascade of musky jet.)
'Why do you weep? The razor's sharp,' he said.

IV

My shadow lay upon her. She looked pale,
Like lotos flowers in shadow. Yet was it not
My shadow made her so? Always that veil,
The shadow of my body, darkening truth and tale.

V

The faqir sitting on his bed of nails
Feels painful Truth imprinting her erratic
Cartouche upon his buttocks, and still fails
To find its meaning aught but enigmatic;
Scatters more dust upon his head and groans
To think that rust, not Truth, invades his bones.

CRAS INGENS ITERABIMUS ÆQUOR

To-day's a prison walled with heavy hours,
Roofed with the impenetrable sky,
Wherein, fettered relentlessly
With clinking chains of minutes, old prisoners die.

To-day's a pit dug deep in earthy time
Whose sides are ribbed with strata of decay,
Impact with stiff blue hours like clay
Through which black roots break from an elder day.

Somewhere, but out of sight, the bright sea stretches.
I only watch a scarlet-petalled tree
On which ten crows perch restlessly,
Two parrot birds, and white-streaked mynahs three.

Ten crows, three mynahs, and two parrot birds,
Green, black, and pied, among the scarlet flowers
They scatter in red fluttering showers:
A gaudy pattern on the dull blue hours.

To-day's a prison but to-morrow's free.
The winds that run in splashy steps along
The meadows of the sea will throng
New venture's shrouds, and fill its sails with song.

No more the dusty gold of India,
And by to-morrow night we'll see no more
The palms and silver of its shore –
Cras ingens iterabimus æquor.

THE PERSIAN GULF

At afternoon the jagged head
  Of Oman, thunder-blue,
Like some dry hell untenanted
  Stood in the midmost view.

(This was the roost for many a year
  Of pirates hid to slay
Fat traders sailing from Bushire
  With pearls to India.)

The waters broke for breathing whales,
  The white bow-surges hissed,
And Persia lay behind three veils
  Of milky opal-mist.

The night, like horses galloping –
  Black horses with wild manes –
Came hugely, and a fierce lightning
  Made bright their bridle-chains.

Loudlier blew the wind
  And blackly ran the sea,
The night was bowed and blind
  Over black Araby.

Till slowly Dawn awoke
  And stretched an empty hand
As pale as wet-wood-smoke
  Over the unseen land.

And out of Persia rose the Day,
  And opened his high door
On ancient cliffs chalk-ribbed with grey,
  And Iran's yellow shore.

IRAQ RAILWAY

Basra to Baghdad, or change if you wish
At Hilla for Babylon, Kifl and Kish.

Babylon's empty and broken and bare,
The Kings of the Earth no longer go there,
The Kings of the Earth philander no more
Who once lived deliciously there with the Whore.

Basra's a camp and a riverside quay,
Pinched by the desert and drowned by the sea.

Nothing I know nor care about Kifl,
Its ruins or rhymes, nor if hippogriff'll
Consort with it neater than should a man stifle
A yawn and write that up to counterpoise Kifl.

Snort along, rattle on, gulp! and the train
Swallows the twin bright snakes on the plain.
Glazy and brown is the way to the sky
Where the shiny mirages quicken and die.

(But Baghdad under the Ramadan moon,
Baghdad calling in an unknown tune,
Calling from the minarets a far faint cry,
And the horn of the Ramadan moon in the sky!)

The desert shimmers like a wet white board,
And the bright light glimmering's a naked sword.
Herds of asses by the railroad track,
Narrow Arab tents all camel-hair-black,

Dark-draped Arabs and their brown woolly sheep
Following the shepherds in a woolly sleep,
Following their shepherds in a meek brown bunch,
And a man in a fez says it's time for lunch.

Fish from a river or fish from a tin,
Steak from a bullock that was old and thin,
Pink jam-pudding and a custard pie,
And beer for the throat that's desert-dust-dry.

Basra north to wherever you wish,
Change at Hilla for Babylon and Kish –

Kish was the father of the Jew King Saul,
But this isn't that kind of Kish at all.
Basra north to the land of the rivers,
Pharpar and Abana, where the quick heart shivers
To feel a wind blow coldly down
From the time Sennacherib wore his crown.
Ur of the Chaldees – the wind's like a knife –
Where Abram wrestled with his haggard wife;
Babylon and Nineveh, your blood goes cold
At the thought of death so deadly old.

But Baghdad beats with a livelier heart
Than the bustle and stir of a desert mart.
It glows like a lamp in the carpet made
By the sly-boots princess, Shahrazad,
In the woven tales that she deftly spread,
Under the curtain of the Caliph's bed,
In the darkness east of the Christendom dawn
With Death agog for the Caliph's yawn.

Baghdad under the Ramadan moon,
Baghdad calling in a half-heard tune,
Calling from the minarets a clear sweet cry,
And the horn of Ramadan moon in the sky.

BAGHDAD

Curving as a scimitar, the desert river,
Tawny in the sun and damascened with foam,
Slashes through the city like a ripe water-melon,
Laying back the green and showing, white as honey-comb,
Bare white walls and the square white gardens
Studded with tufty palms a-shiver
In the river breeze; and beyond the trees
Cornfields lying like a green desert pool,
A cornfield sea whose waves break cool
On the walls and the gardens in the ripple-making breeze.

Baghdad white as the desert moon,
Caught in a cornfield-green lagoon,
Split by the scimitar, stained and brown,
Of the river ruling the Caliph's town.

But deep in the heart of the whiteness lurking
Life is wasting and darkly working,
Watching, thriving, and beating swords
For desert robbers and desert lords.
Deep in the smoky-blue bazar
Where the coppersmiths and the merchants are,
More strong threads than a weaver can
Count in a carpet from Turkestan
Twist in a pattern that few would choose,
Riddle and twine in a dark design
Of indigo, ochre, and blood-red hues.

Life is loud in the coppersmiths' street
Where the hammers bellow in the furnace heat,
And the echoes shout, 'O beat! O beat!' –
A brazen clamour and an iron din
And the clang of the pan as the rivet goes in;
Batter and clash, and a heart in the whole
Like a pulse reverbing in a copper bowl.

But out in the sun lay a porter sleeping,
His mouth agape, and the flies were creeping
On to his teeth and his bright pink tongue
As if he had slept since the town was young,
Since the Caliph and his Vizier
And a Nubian Executioner
Walked by starlight, peeping, prying,
Picking secrets and laughing, lying. . . .
Perhaps in his basket there might linger
A ring from the Caliph's shapely finger,
A stolen purse, or a head all gory,
Something to make a Caliph's story
Or prick to travel, like a spur,
A woeful one-eyed Calender.

THE PERSIAN ROAD

I

A road for merchants and
For brigands; a road for those who seek
Their way to Samarkand;
A road for Kurds and nomads; a road, a streak
Of trodden earth that tramps between
Dark mountain walls and over green
Great ocean fields of grass, and by
Squat Persian town and caravanserai;
A road that camel-hinds and pilgrims planned,
The Road, the Persian Road to Samarkand.
A road that walks with orchards at its side
And leaves the cherry-trees to take
A desert in its stride;
And still in orchards and in mountains wake
The jangling echoes of the camel bells,
As if a singing freshet flowed
Through silver runnels and melodious wells
Beside the caravans along the Persian Road.

II

The snow ebbs upward on the solid hills,
The naked new-born earth comes out to dry,
A scattered avalanche of blossom fills
The cherry-trees beneath a cobalt sky.

The caravans unpack their merchandise
And eighty camels grumble in a ring –
Ho! camel-hinds, can any tell where lies
The caravan that brought the Persian Spring?

III

(BISITUN)

Darius, King of Kings, was here;
Darius sent a pioneer
To carve his greatness on the rocks –
Now the king the carving mocks.

Greek and Goth and Muscovite
Came by here to flee or fight,
Last of all the English came –
No one carved another name.

I, DARIUS, KING OF KINGS –
Every army as it swings
Round the corner mutters, '*That's*
A useful warning for Brass Hats!'

IV

The wind blew harshly through Kasvin,
The beggar-children ran
Half-naked, weeping and unclean,
To shame the foreign man.
'Foreigner, foreigner, give us a penny,
We're hungry and cold, and you have so many!'

Their cheeks were livid through the dirt,
Their eyes were strained and old,
They cried like dogs that had been hurt
And chattered with the cold.
'Foreigner, foreigner, give us some more,
Our fingers are frozen, our feet are so sore!'

They picked their coppers from the road –
Their tears no longer ran,
They were indifferent to the cold
And to the foreign man.

V

Chocolate and green, the plain ran on
To lion-coloured hills; the sunlight shone,
Impartial, equal, stressing nothing there,
On fields unploughed and pitilessly bare.

And then, as if the air had taken fire,
The sun picked out a pattern of gold wire
And sliding jewels – two hoopoes, delicate
As toys, fighting like eagles for a mate.

VI

(TEHERAN)

Here are white walls, and ease, and falling fountains,
  Obedient trees, and gardens neatly planned.
Beyond – why, mountains, desert, and more mountains,
  And the eternal road to Samarkand.

Here's chatter of bazar. Beyond the hills,
  Great Asian names, Bokhara, Khorassan –
Tumultuous, rough-singing syllables
  Like echoes of a brawling caravan.

PART III

SEVEN YEARS

I

Beauty's a rose, a shining sword, a thief;
  Beauty's a singing flute, the narrow flame
That lights the incense-smoke of all belief.
  Beauty was You, and You were beauty's name
When I was young: rose, thief, and cutting sword,
  The flute, the flame – I lost my peace to this,
Reached up for that, bled here, and there adored,
  Nor, thus bewildered, thought my state amiss.

Youth gives his heart away, for youth's ill fortune
  Is often to have nothing else to give:
Where others bargain he must still importune –
  You laughed, and found a fuller life to live.
You were not rich because of me, it's true,
But I was bankrupt quite because of you.

II

Youth is not easy to be comforted.
I rubbed my hurt and innocent You reviled,
Bitterly saying: You will take Time to bed,
And what's so slim – Oh, poplar-slim and wild –
Will lose its shape in dull maturity,
Grow tame, and drag its common ripeness through
A world grown old. Only my memory
Shall live to be a travesty of you,
A beautiful death-mask of your youth to mock
Your silly withered age, a lovely ghost
To run in front when your tired heart shall knock
At climbing stairs. So let your mirror boast,
    Now, while there's time, of all it looks upon:
    That image dies; mine only can live on.

III

And when I went where beauty was, why there
  Your ghost would walk, and so I've stood with you
On Indian hills to see the morning flare
  Sudden, through silver mist, flamingo-hue.

Still wonderless you watched the sea-miles spread
  Blue carpets silver-stippled with the sun,
And the horn of a Greek moon kept us from bed
  That lonely and beautiful day being done.

But less and less you came; for who can save
  Dreams in the clamour of a world awake?
Dreams die of life, and we fill up their grave
  With dust and ashes of a new heartache.

And ghosts, like wanderers weary for the sea,
Watch for the sullen ebb of memory.

IV

And then I found you once again. And I
Was silent. My heart was still as those old men
Upon the walls of Troy where, passing by,
They saw white Helen in the morning; when
Their wheezy chatter stopt; they stood, and knew
No words to say. But buried in each mind
Dead Aprils stirred to feel a moment's dew,
They smelt again the salt Ægean wind.

So all that I had learnt in seven years
Was dumb; but things I knew of old awoke,
And loud as trumpets and as salt as tears
To every county of my body spoke:
'This is the secret of untaken Troy,
To keep, being man, that which you loved when boy.'

V

Once you were mystery: the slant white sail,
That ship-boys in the shrouds see glimmering
'Tween sky and sea. Once you were startled Spring,
Slim fruitless April in her secret vale
That lets no heavy harvest-month inside.
Oh, once you were that fierce compelling tune
The passionate and solitary moon
Sings to her silver chamberer the tide.

But mystery's resolved. The white ship yields
To foreign sailormen; and dancers tread
Sweet songs beneath their feet. Now Spring has fled
Her quiet valley for the waiting fields,
Flung down her golden buckler of the broom,
And like a bride put on white orchard-bloom.

VI

So you fulfilled your lovely singing-time,
And quickening with early summer bore
Your maiden sons, boys merry as a rhyme
And fearless as a young Conquistador.

Yours was the royalty of earth to give
Such comely earth to the devouring seed,
And that was reckless earth's old will to live,
Since beauty dies if beauty will not breed.

'Give all, take all!' the flowing seasons cry,
'Sap rises still and dew drops down the air.
Beauty that cossets overlong goes dry
And smells of camphor though it look still fair.

'Sweeter's the rose that joy in summer took
Than virgin flowers pressed wanly in a book.'

VII

Still let me love though I may not possess!
  This love and I have lived so long together,
  Burnt by the sun, blown white in winter weather,
That we've grown one, inseparable unless
The antic Fates fetch thunder from the blue
  And clout my head to give the Circus mirth –
  And then, I think, when I went home to earth,
My love's poor ghost would hurry home to you.

But while I live – and I've no mind to die –
  Still let me love! For you'll be none the worse:
  Only the poor count pence and keep a purse –
There is no shadow when the sun is high –
  You'll let me love? Where such a garden grows
  Surely you can be generous with a rose.

RUMBELOW

Said Rumbelow: I sail the sea
With three-and-thirty wishes,
And if the Lord is good to me
Mayhap He'll grant the nether Three
Before I feed the fishes.

I want to see the Southern Isles
And brown girls, naked, dancing there
With moon-white blossom in their hair.
I want to see the River Nile
Slide like a fat green snake between
The dusty pyramids, and dream
Of Israel sweating there –
Good Lord, how Hebrews sweat!
I've seen black Jews of Cochin drip
Like *mussucks* full of running jet. . . .
O Indian beaches! I must ship
Aboard an Indiaman again
For Mangalore and Calicut,
And Eastward yet, where tropic rain
Falls like a cataract to shut
The green-and-opal world away
Behind a curtain of glass-grey.
Green parrots in the trees – I want
To ride upon an elephant
Down sombre paths through silent teak,
Echo-less, wet and endless aisles
Where only parrots speak.
I want to see gnarled crocodiles,
Slumbrous and scaly in the mud.

I want the jewel in a Moghul's ear;
A ruby red as the spirting blood
Of a stumbling, sword-stuck mutineer;
Pretty grass-green emeralds;
And whiter pearls than a shark's belly
Turning in the Indian sea –
Hey! but not for vanity,
Not for sinful pride, I tell 'ee,
Covet I such dainty gauds. . . .
But once I saw
A Ranee and her women walk,
Laughing, into a lotos-pool.
They were more beautiful
Than thought or memory can draw;
As fair as moonlight; when they did talk
It seemed small birds flashed to and fro.
And they were lithe and delicate,
With little pouting breasts, backs straight,
And eyebrows like a taut thin bow
Bright beetle-black, and they alone
Of all the women I have known
Were perfect. Well; a perfect stone
Might buy such perfect ones; for pearls
Out of their stinking oysters peer,
Like Nature's unoffending bawds,
To argue prettily with girls
And stop a wife's uneasy fears. . . .
Lord, but how quickly angry dust
Whirls like a desert storm to lust!
Salt water breeds this lechery.
But I have simple wishes, too,
For innocenter things to do.

I want to kill, before I die,
Three Frenchmen and three Portuguese,
Three Hollanders, and after these
The man who slept with Susie Pye
A year ago come Lady Day,
An Isle of Pines mulatto – *foh!*
Such appetites in women grow,
To lie with negroes, and in Lent!
But we're not born to find content
In homeward things, and we must go
About the waste of waters till
Our timbers settle
On tidal mud or Noah's hill,
Where there's leave to rest and play
For a season or a day;
Then it's up again and haul,
Head to sea and next land-fall,
Ararat will vanish fast,
Look on it and look your last,
We're for Popocatapetl! . . .
About the waste of waters, Lord,
With this unruly crew aboard
Of wishes wilful as a boy
And hunger huge as Horse of Troy!
But here are sober wishes, three
That live together quietly:
I want to read the Bible through,
From Earth's beginning in the Void
To Jesus flowering out of Jew
And Babylon destroyed.
I want to buy a Kashmir shawl
That Mother may be comforted,

Who nearly perished, so she said,
Of cold last Fall.
I want to find a girl who's true,
And I to be as true as she –
These are three, Lord, let me win,
Bible, Shawl, and Constancy,
And Constancy a twin!

So Rumbelow went back to sea
Counting up his wishes.
The Thirty came to hand or knee,
Rumbelow! Rumbelow!
But ere he got the nether Three
The greenest wave of all the sea,
Rumbelow!
Came aboard for him and he
Went to feed the fishes.

THE NAUGHTY BROOMSTICK

Lilith, the hag who is older than men,
Picked me out of the potting-shed,
Gripped with her thighs (they were thin as a pen)
My shrinking side; with a jerk at my head

'Up, come up!' quoth Lilith the hag,
'Over the wall to Jeopardy!'
And the tail of the moon, like a yellow rag,
Flew out of a cloud on the lip of the sea.

The potting-shed was as warm as a nest,
The smell of the soil was a friendly thing,
And the nightingale who had come as a guest
Of the wet white roses began to sing.

'Up, come up!' and we flew the wall
And mounted the sky to Jeopardy,
And I saw the moon, that was gold and small,
Like a ripe fruit fallen behind the sea.

Over the clouds that were heavy with rain,
Over the clouds of black desire,
By smoky fields and a cirrus plain
And little white clouds that were fringed with fire,

We rode to the ruddled watershed
That furrows the sky with its molten rills,
And the spate of the silver brooks was spread
Like a filigree on the burnt foot-hills.

And lit by the moons of a foreign star,
Beryl and cherry and green as the sea,
Beyond the mountains of cinnabar
Was the ivory land of Jeopardy.

My heart was as white as a bleaching rag
For love and taking and beauty and fear,
And the bony knees of Lilith the hag
Struck at my flanks like the haft of a spear.

She laughed, and the noise of her laughter rang
On the mountains of murrey and cinnabar;
She laughed, and clutching her skirts she sprang
To the cinder-beach of a burnt-out star.

The light of the hills and the stranger moons
Faded, faded, as I fell,
And spatial symphonies and cosmic tunes
Were like a deafening great bell.

I fell, and I frightened the roses' guest,
The nightingale who had come to sing,
But the potting-shed was as warm as a nest
And the smell of the earth was a friendly thing.

'Heart of my heart,
There's midget mirrors in your eyes.'

'But yours are dark,'
She whispered, 'dark and dark. What can you
see
In mine?'

'A leaf, a wisp of cloud, and me.'

'Come closer, then. Shut out the skies,
And leave no room for cloud or tree.'

'Heart of my heart,' he said.
Her tapered black eyelashes thread
Round tears like pearls, and anxious sighs
Escape her lips. Her fingers bend
To hold like rivets till the end.
Now all the birds collect their song
And every flower, pink and blue,
And kingcups like a golden gong
Reflect a momentary hue
Upon a world that ecstasy
Tears out of time and space to sail –
A kite against a burning sky –
On that sweet singing gale.

He said, 'The world stood still for this,
Lest common minutes told the time
Between a greedy and a grateful kiss.'

But she declares,
''Twas we were trapped within the rhyme
That knits the earth to brighter stars.'

'There was a bud of that first Apple Tree
That never flowered till now,' he said.
'Oh, were there ever lovers such as we,
Such love as ours?'

'Heart of my heart!' she pled.

A rabbit sat up in the fern,
Inquisitive and brisk, to turn
With twitching nose and eyes astare
Towards the splendid lovers there.

And then with something like a yawn
He dropped again and lolloped on,
Flirting his blob of tail between
The seeded bracken, brown and green.

What though another god were born,
Or fruit disguised a barren thorn?
Even miracles grow dull by habit,
And love no more impressed the rabbit.

SONG FOR AN ABLE BASTARD

I wish I loved an honest girl,
  Unseeking and unsought,
Whose lips were soft as they were shy,
  And not as they were taught.

I wish – but what's the use of that?
  The only she in town
Is half as wanton as she's fair
  And light as thistle-down.

And that's my luck, for I was born
  When a March moon was mad –
I wish I loved an honest girl,
  I wish my father had.

SOLDIERS AND GUNS

Soldiers and guns, soldiers and guns,
These for your daughters and those for your sons.
What if your children be lovely and tall?
When soldiers and guns come, down they will fall.

WEDDING MORNING

'Who slept with the Bride last night?'
'I,' said the Best Man, 'as any man might
Of the dozen she danced to and eyed –
I slept with the Bride.'

'Who slept with the Groom?'
'I,' said I, 'in his boyhood's room
Where secret things were brought to mend,
For I was his boyhood's friend;

'And we helped each other upstairs to bed,
As drunk as pipers, and prone to shed
Tears for our sins and the years' lost bloom –
Oh, I slept with the Groom!'

'Who woke with the dawn
And ran for a rose across the lawn?'
'The youngest bridesmaid, little Doreen,
She woke with a laugh – she's only sixteen.'

THE NARROW BED

The blanket is rough and cold
Nor any comfort holds,
The wind blows bitterly
Out of a winter sea.

The water is frozen deep
In the iron pot at the door;
The bairn I dreaded sore
Lies stiffly under its sheet –
The clay so little and cold
That moved in my body's mould.

The long night brings no rest,
And what is the use to pray
For the weariness of day?
The milk is cold in my breasts,
They lie like heavy stones.
And I must sleep alone.

No night was long as this,
Nor the bed so cold last year.
The night brought warmth and bliss
When a tall man lay here.
But love is no lasting thing,
And he went with the Spring.

The cold is in every limb
And my heavy breasts do ache.
My heart is hungry for him,
Or for some other mate;

And I do not think that he
Is lying so lonelily.

Some woman sleeps upon
His arm that is white and strong:
No man would lie alone
With the nights so cold and long.

LAST NIGHT

Last night the moon rose early
Like a climbing butterfly,
Spreading a sulphur wing
On the cloudless bluebell sky.

To-night like a spinning coin
That a giant had idly tost,
The moon rose high in the clouds
And a little higher was lost.

O yesternight my love and I
Had all to win and lose,
And all we lost was love itself,
So cowardly we chose.

The midwife poured his dram for him.
'God speed the child,' he said,
And greedily stared at
The girl in bed.

The white road seemed a scar across
The forehead of the earth,
And hardy winds blew by
In scornful mirth.

The western sky was full of wings
And crimson bolts of cloud,
The lift was a strap of steel
That earth had bowed.

'And rot his soul who lies with her,
Where I should lie,' he said,
'And choke his heart, and chill
With doubt his bed.'

The sky sprang straight with the twang of a bow,
Horizons flew apart,
The red bolts of cloud
Stuck in his heart.

Blyde-meat: Cake and wine, or whisky, given to early callers on a young mother.

There is never a woman or man that I weep for
Over the earth,
Not a lost comrade or mate that I seek for,
Knowing their worth.
For men will drink and forget,
And new women are waiting the wanderer –
Who cares when the cup is upset?
And the love-penny rings for the squanderer.

But the islands far to the north where the grey seas
Thunder and roar,
And the white-winged gull on its cliff-high way sees
A storm-riven shore –
For these I am hungry of heart,
And the mated curlew's warning,
For the red peat-hearth at dark
And its smoke rising straight in the morning.

THE SAILOR

Why do you go
Thus to and fro,
Why do you roam?
Said the Man at Home.

Why not sit still
On this green hill? . . .
A greener sea
Is best for me.

But comfort's dear,
And peace is here. . . .
I own no peace
Except surcease;

When beautiful
Strange lands look dull,
I'll seek no more
But live ashore.

And what will you
Find here to do,
Remembering
The world in Spring?

I'll look for what
You've already got,
You Man at Home.

My thought was fair enough – she was God's gift –
But sprawled through easy verses in her shift.
And then more decently, as in brocade,
I dressed her in stiff iambs with rhymes for braid,
And hid her. Pit-a-pat my poor heart went –
I loved her now, scarce seeing what she meant.

PART IV

FOTHERINGAY . . . . *8th February* 1587.

This is the Queen's room. Tread softly here
For this one night. Another night,
And you may thunder on her door
With boot and staff – you will not waken her.

Her hands, still smooth and white,
Crossed on the last year's summer of her breast,
Felt quietness slowly grow within her side
And peace beneath the crucifix that pressed
A Christ of smooth old yellow ivory
Close to her heart. . . . Years, years ago she would lie
As still as this because of other love
That comforted and took its comfort so:
The dying boy who would not let her move
Because of pain that stammered like an idiot
In his sick brain. Poor Francis; he had been
The first of those who loved her and had died,
Long, long ago. And that sour queen,
Old Catherine, the poisoner, who spied
And peeped in corners. . . .
Fear of the darkness took her by the throat
Again, as if to drown her. It was so huge,
So purposeless and full of malice, that it might –
Suppose she died in it – carry her like a paper boat
Unnoticed in the black deluge
Of all the tides of night
Past God to chaos and the wrack of stars.
She was afraid to stir
Because the darkness followed her,

Hedging her in. Darkness had always
Frightened her: the birth of winter days,
The gross impenetrable darkness of
A starless night, the coffin-dark of rooms
Unlit, the dense obscurity of tombs
Flooded with darkness, eddies and stagnant pools
Of shadow behind doors and under stairs,
Shadow in corners where listeners or Christmas fools
Could pounce from unawares. . . .
Darnley had cackled once behind a door
When Riccio was with her. Catherine's
White face came like a shrunken moon
From corner-shadows once. And once at empty noon
Mad Arran leapt from a corner shrieking, 'Whore!'
Darkness in corners bred in fearful shapes,
Treachery, devils laughing, rapes
And madness.

Sometimes her life had seemed
A Bedlam galliard, a madman's masque
Where no one dared to ask
His neighbour to uncover lest he show
Corruption's food for worms below
The silk . . . a soldier's anger, Chastelard with lust
Perched like a monkey on his sleeve, the dust
Upon the beggar's face who screamed
One day at her – beating himself with nettles he
Had screamed, 'Here's sauce for venery!

Who pulled the stars
To stick on a thorn?
My cuckoldy father
Before I was born!' –

Till Gordon drove his horse at him and bade
Him sing in hell. . . . And Knox; he too was mad,
Living, except for devils and old women, all alone
In deserts of his own creation.
How he had pelted her with words like hail,
Beaten his drums about, gone to and fro
With Levites and the Ark and saints in mail
To storm white Jericho!
And while his argument
Strove with her brain and wrestled with her wits,
His thoughts grew wild and went
Like lovers' thieving hands beneath her gown,
And his gaunt flesh, over and over again,
Cried, 'Throw her body down,
Humble her body as you'd humble brain!' –
'Down, devils, down!' he'd cry,
And stony texts from Sinai
Would multiply and fill the air.
Old Knox was mad, or how could he
Love Christ and hate Christ's mother? Or for-
swear
The Church that was the Bride of Christ,
And yoke his love to fierce austerity?
O profitless debate! There was a tryst
That she must keep within an hour or two,
And then debate was vain.

Her mouth went dry,
She sickened (like a boy who's climbed too high
And feels the branch wave and the ground careen)
To think of death, the thud of the axe, the keen
White wing of the blade, poised, ready to stoop

Like a kestrel and tear her throat . . . heavy and
bright
And sudden as fear at night . . .
Even a pinprick hurt.
And they might throw her body in the dirt,
Broken and maimed, as she had seen
A black-cock thrown, that Bothwell took between
His hands to twist its neck – and then, so rough
His hands were – they smelt of blood in bed – the
head came off,
Leaving a bloody stalk. . . . She caught her breath
To think of the twitching agony of that death. . . .
And then more calmly thought:
'Why, that's not death, that frantic strife
On the ground. That's but the ugly last of life.
There is no death but loneliness.
Nothing can rob me of my hope
As life has done. No seer could trace
An emptier horoscope
For life to come than my life past.
There is no death but loneliness.
And I have lain, oh, often-times aghast
For loneliness. . . . When Francis died –
Because a boy should die – when Darnley lied –
Because he stript me naked with his lies,
Bare to mid-winter scorn in hostile eyes;
Darnley the fool and knave –
No wit to jest, no wisdom to be grave,
The fool whose common folly was obscene,
The knave whose wickedness was only mean.
Darnley the weakling. . . . What was the beggar's
stave?

"Who left a palace
To sleep in a stye?
My trull of a mother,
My sister, and I."

But I was weak with loneliness, too weak
To live alone. Sometimes the moon will sleep
In muddy waters for an hour; stars swim
In gutter-pools, and thrushes sing
At almshouse windows. But do they hate them then –
Moon, stars, and thrushes – hate the hungry men
Who throw no crumbs; the gutter; and the mud?
I hated him. . . .
But I am guiltless, God, guiltless of blood!
I did not kill him, God, I did not know
That they would kill him. I did not know
What things they meant,
And I am innocent!
O God, it was so long ago! . . .'

Wild echoes of that ancient storm awoke,
Dazing her memory with thunderbolt
And rain and frightened wind. . . . Somewhere her home
Was hidden in the trees, and she must roam
For ever through a windy wood aflame
With mad brown leaves that crackled on their bare
Black bones of branches; full of thorns to tear
The face and hands of travellers; and there
Were wings and voices shouting in the trees,

Tumult of cloud above the swinging frame
Of highest boughs, and underfoot
A thousandfold decay
Of greenery gone grey.
Weary she stumbled on in white pursuit
Of hope, a Jack o' Lantern hope, a blind
Fond hope that somewhere she would find
The loveliness of peace, tranquillity,
And silver roofs beneath a quieter moon.

A quiet moon. . . . There was an idle song,
Unfairly mated to a sweeter tune,
That Chastelard had made for her, too long
Ago for memory to trap its words;
And yet – their shadows flew like frightened birds
About her brain – such foolish words, but strung
Upon a silver thread of tune:

'The skies of France no more are fair,
And small birds in the empty air
Make dirges of their shrill despair –
The Moon of France has sailed away.

'As yellow as an old doubloon
The Sun peers through the clouds at noon
Still searching for his milk-white Moon,
The Moon that sailed so far away.

'Orion rakes high starry seas,
And Vega, low among the trees,
Calls to the weeping Pleiades
For news of her who sailed away. . . .'

The night he sang that song a sudden wind
Burst in the door, blew out the lamp like a yellow sail
Ripped from its mast. That night an autumn gale
Had stolen seven ships, while earth-bound gusts
Threw chimney-pots about.
And overhead, untroubled by the storm,
Immeasurably distant lights inclined
Contemptuous eyes upon such furious dust –
These were the friendly stars, she thought,
The curious, indignant, lover-stars,
Poised in eternal sequence, rank and form,
That wept for her and noisy Chastelard! . . .

'But she has gone to light and bless
A bitter land with her caress,
A land of little gentilesse –
The Moon of France is far away!'

No land for queens to rule, however strong.
Even Elizabeth would have failed there
Without her Cecil, Walsingham, and Howard.
There counsellors set counsel like a snare,
And murder prospered if its purse were long;
When thieves are soldiers justice is a coward. . . .

Close-lipped and doeskin-white beneath
Her flaming hair – that Judas hedge of hair –
The semblance of Elizabeth
Found out a window in the dark to stare
At her with eyes glass-grey, inscrutable
And cold; and her reported smell
Of camphor and apothecaries' herbs

Came with the dream. Elizabeth:
She too would come to death,
The queen who saved her body for the worms.
Death is the only lover who
Will let you sleep. His coffin-terms
Are easy, and easily his hands undo
The weariness, the wedding-dress,
To soothe you into sleepiness
Where slumber will not cease.
Death is the only lover who
Will let you lie in peace.
A drowsy wave
Fell slurring into sleep and drowned
The English queen, green billows lave
The sliding shore, and snore on round
Soft-rolling pebble-stones; slowlier
Fall waves that crumble and say *shir-r-rr*
Among the pebble-stones. . . .
Now like a ghost
Wakes Bothwell from a murmurous host
Of shadows; red lips that try to speak,
Among the crowding shades a burlier shade,
A sullen eye that bids men keep apart.
His hand upon her shoulder once had made
A trumpet sing surrender in her heart
And all her blood hang banners in her cheek.
Once she had thought him a great soldier, till
That day at Carberry when he stood and watched,
Biting his nails, Morton and Lindsay massing
Their pikemen on the little gorse-gold hill,

Not knowing what to do. Brave plans he hatched
For border raids, but a king's war,
To win a kingdom back, outwent his skill.

The pageant of dead days passed quicker now,
Lovers and ghosts of lovers – without warning
Mad Arran gibbered at her, Riccio
Came screaming back with blood upon his brow,
And Gordon knelt again, whiter than death
On his black scaffold. Now she felt the breath
Of Douglas on her hair, pleading, pleading,
And heard the wind upon Loch Leven. Now
Her brother came to plague her, but his beard
Grew longer and the face was Knox's, reading
Great Hebrew texts that once damned Jezebel. . . .

She fled them like a fox
By sleepy field and vague unending fell,
And overhanging rocks
On upward moors. Now looking back
Stiffly, with foot in marsh, at the charging pack,
Now stooping against the cloudy sky,
She led the endless hue-and-cry
Of dreams along. O frantic foolish feet
And leaden limbs stuck in the mire of sleep!
O threatening mouths and hands that hungrily
Reached out for her! O topless hill!
Teeth bare and streaming eyes
And heart of agonies
She fled them still –
And the top of the hill was a cliff,
And she fell,

Fell, fell like a stone
And alone,
Over the edge of her dream.

Within the shadow of the hill
Of consciousness were peace at last (as if
The world rode slower in its starry round)
And sleep as little troubled as the child's
That slumbers in a happy womb.
And night, as if compassionate at last,
Heedless to noises of the waking world,
Night stooped in love upon the mortal room
And turned her back against the importunate dawn.

For two short fields away
A restless cock woke noisily
With dreams of sunrise in his scarlet head,
And all the grass was carpeted
With gossamer for the bright feet of Day.

Some of these poems have previously appeared in *The London Mercury*, *The English Review*, *The Scots Magazine*, and *Everyman*, to whose Editors I am indebted.